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DO WE EDUCATE?

IDA AHLBORN WEEKS

This question, in the face of the large sums of money that we spend for education, may sound like an impertinence. But, as people may spend largely for food and dress and be neither well fed nor well clad, so they may spend largely for education and still fail of being rightly educated. We may even have pure food laws and yet be ill nourished; and we may have excellent school legislation and yet many a child go forth into life without the training that the school ought to have given him.

General statements like the above weigh little; but, if we throw into the scale with them a single specific instance, the weight becomes significant.

In a state that has an excellent compulsory school law, that has a common-school course so extended that it must often prove a weariness of flesh to teachers, in such an enlightened state a child grew up to the age of sixteen years. Her home was in a beautiful and healthful town of about two thousand inhabitants. The family was poor, the father addicted to drink and subject to epileptic attacks. Moreover, love for strong drink was a family heritage. As one might expect, the mother took in washing to help in the support of the household. In such a home the child lived, and grew familiar with a destitution that frequently sent her begging from door to door. But the worst thing befell the family when the mother was placed in the insane asylum. After a short time she returned, but soon went back as a permanent inmate of the institution, though her insanity is said not to be hereditary. For a few years—until his death—the father kept the children together in a fashion.

It would not be strange to hear the inquiry, What good thing can come out of such a domestic Nazareth? Five children came out of that wretched home, children of apparently average endowments as to mind and body. One of them was a

comely girl of sixteen. What has the great state of her nativity done to educate her?

The state failed at two points: first, it failed to give her such an education as is provided for by the common-school course of study and by the compulsory school law; secondly, it failed to take her needs and gifts into consideration and thus to train her along lines where she could have been trained to advantage.

In extenuation of the state, it may be said on the first point, that the education of such a child constitutes a very hard problem. Let her put the case. "I always had to stay at home and take care of the younger children while mother was washing. I went about one day in the week. I hadn't clothes like other children." Her irregular attendance along with her dulness as to books kept her far behind most girls of her age. When she was fourteen she was in the third grade, and beyond this grade she never advanced. "I was good in numbers," she said with some pride. But she can neither read nor write. "The teacher never made me read on account of my eyes," is her explanation. (Her defective sight might have been remedied by glasses, as has since been done.) Her teacher, being visited, corroborated the statements; and added, with some disgust, a tribute to the stupidity of her former pupil, revoking it, however, in almost the same breath by saying, "If it was doing anything about the room, such as cleaning the desk or shelves, Susie was eager to do it, and she did it quite well."

The teacher indicated a line of training that might have been given to this girl to advantage, the line of manual training. Her ignorance at this point is dense and destructive. She cannot sew. This does not mean that she cannot make a gown; it means that she cannot hem a coarse dish-towel in a fitting manner. Her stitches can easily be surpassed by many a little maker of doll's garments. She cannot bake bread; her attempts resulting in ill-shaped, heavy loaves unfit for food. She cannot cook; she had never heard of baking a potato. She does not know how to make a bed, or sweep a room, or iron a napkin. A little coarse scouring and cleaning she can do. For such work she has both the muscle and the energy. Another

point in her favor is a disposition that stands the severe test of constant criticism and correction of her work. She improves under instruction. Undoubtedly the state could have done much for her if it had trained her mind largely through her hands.

Of right ideas of living, which the school, in a measure, might have imparted to her, she is almost destitute. Thus, while she lacks a tooth-brush and other indispensable toilet articles, she does not lack perfumery or face powder or chewing-gum. Comfort and becoming simplicity in dress she was taught neither at home nor at school; and hence she shivers in her insufficient clothing and offends good taste by her tawdry finery. Appearances are everything with her: an embroidered shirt-waist to wear to a big dance, the third outside skirt for Sunday wear, bought on the instalment plan, and—the less said about undergarments the better. Her lack of warm clothing she explains by saying, “I spent my money going to the theater.” Pleasure, a good time, is her aim in life; and that her pleasures are cheap and shallow is partly the result of her faulty training.

It may seem that a girl of sixteen is still quite young enough to make good, in some degree, her educational loss. Granting that, who is to compel her to do it? No one has any legal authority over her. She would never consent to pay for private instruction out of her small wages; nor would she consent to re-enter the public school and suffer the humiliation of ranking with little children. Not even a free night-school where she could receive individual instruction would appeal to her. She would not sacrifice finery or pleasure or pride to learn to read and write. The desultory manner of her school attendance, so far from awaking in her a thirst for knowledge, seems rather to have turned her away from books and all they stand for. Unskilled labor must remain her field, and that she will translate either into domestic service, to the trial of any mistress, or into factory work along some line as limited as pasting labels on bottles. Out of some such position she is likely to pass early to the grave responsibilities of a home of her own, modeled, in all probability, on the home in which she was reared. If society

gets off as easily as this, it may well congratulate itself upon escape from severer penalty.

One swallow does not make a summer; and we may add, with equal truth, that one snowbird does not make a winter. Neither does one instance of the kind described wholly condemn the educational policy of a state; yet, regarding this young girl with pity in her want and ignorance—for which she is but slightly responsible—and knowing how dire and far-reaching are the consequences of these, and conjecturing that the one case implies the existence of similar cases, I repeat the question, “Do we educate?”